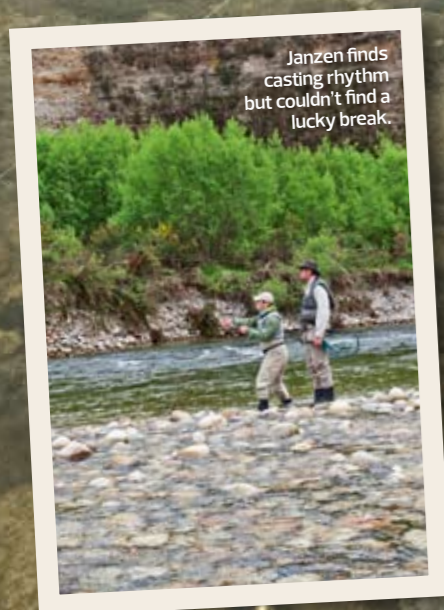


Oh what a feelin! A nice five-pounder landed late on the second day.



Janzen finds casting rhythm but couldn't find a lucky break.

I STINK. SEVEN days in a campervan will do that to a man, even if the van is actually a relative palace on wheels. My travel companion and editor, Nick Janzen, can smell me, I'm sure of it. Every time I raise my arms to do a little dance to whichever John Denver song is playing on the CD player, Janzen winces and rolls the window down a little further. He even lent me his extra-strength anti-perspirant deodorant. Not powerful enough.

We both breathe a little sigh of relief when we pull into the gravel driveway of Owen River Lodge (north of Murchison, for those of you who need a point of reference), New Zealand's only five-star-rated specialist fly-fishing lodge. Our week on the road has been an amazing experience, and we're a little sad to step out of our big white Maui campervan (or 'road maggot', as the locals would call it), but the promise of hot, high-pressure showers, private bathrooms, five-star meals and soft comfortable beds have us smiling from ear to ear.

Owner and manager of Owen River Lodge, Felix Borenstein, has seen us pull up in our massive van, and has come to greet us. He regards our van with an air of amusement, and proceeds to take us on a brisk tour of the fly-fishing lodge we'd be calling home for the next four nights.

Weary from time on the road, unexpectedly hot, long days and some tough fishing, we can only grin like idiots as Felix shows us the inviting open-air hot tub, fresh vegetable and herb garden (used by the head chef every night in his meals) and amazing views of and boardwalk down to the edge of Owen River, running mightily in full view of the lodge. Snow dusts the peaks of the surrounding mountains, reminiscent

of the dandruff gathering on my black shirt after a week of rough living and short showers. Felix walks us through the luxurious digs of the main lodge – the entertainment room, dining room, in-lodge fly-fishing store then, finally, our bedroom.

He gestures towards a comfortable-looking bed and remarks, "I hope you don't mind sharing a bed – times are a bit tough."

Nick and I swap a terrified glance. Nick clears his throat and says, "No, no of course not, that's absolutely fine, Felix." Ever the professional.

Felix holds his poker face for as long as he can, before a soon-to-be-trade-mark wry smile creeps across it, and he chuckles before casually mentioning the room next door is reserved for us, too. We pretend we knew it was a joke all along. It's from this moment we know we're going to be in good company and good spirits with Felix as our host, and we're going to be sleeping perhaps a little more soundly than we have in our campervan beds in this brilliantly appointed lodge, located in the hills of fly-fishing paradise.

Guide-to-be

After a standard breakfast of home-made muesli, bacon and eggs and delicious local fruit, we're greeted by our guide for the trip – Paul. Paul's a local

"The range of rivers and streams available within an hour's drive of the lodge is huge, and the conditions, surroundings and level of experience required to fish them are all taken into consideration by the local guides"

of Dutch heritage who has been fishing the region for more than 20 years, and looks like a fly-fishing Paul Hogan.



They can't all be monsters, but a very pretty fish nonetheless.

Before we've even gathered our fly gear, we know this guy is a complete guru, and we're already humbly babbling that we're still learning the ways of wily NZ brown trout and the nuances of competent fly fishing.

"Save us, oh Paul, for we are not worthy!"

Paul has a great sense of humour – must be why he gets on so well with Felix – and calmly explains to us that his list of clients actually includes a fairly high percentage of beginners, and we start to relax a little.

Our first day is to be quite local –

Words Jack Scrine Photos Jack Scrine & Nicholas Janzen

River of dreams



The Modern Fishing team continues its road trip and heads to New Zealand's best fly lodge and trout fishery to earn its fly-fishing PhD



The South Island is one of those places that makes you happy to be alive and fishing.

though the range of rivers and streams available within an hour's drive of the lodge is huge, and the conditions, surroundings and level of experience required to fish them are all taken into consideration by the local guides before each trip.

The network of rivers is systematically covered by the guides in a fashion that does not flog the hell out of any territory. The cooperation of Felix's team of guides in this sense is excellent and goes a long way to making the fishing so good.

"The trout don't grow big by being stupid, and fish over 8lb or so are incredibly wily, having seen their share of flies and strangely dressed anglers"

The Nelson Lakes region is renowned as a sight-fishing big-brown-trout paradise. On a good day you can expect to spot at least 20 fish, cruising in the shallows or feeding in the current and eddies. Fishing the region is also, however, referred to by Paul as a PhD in fly angling. To further complete the picture, we refer to ourselves as fly-fishing first-grad-

ers. The trout here don't grow big by being stupid, and nearly all fish over 8lb or so are incredibly wily, having seen their fair share of flies and strangely dressed anglers. We have a moment on our last day of fishing, as we silently and perfectly stalk a huge 12lb brown trout, only to have it reject our offering for seemingly no reason, slowly turn around and disappear. It pops up right next to us moments later, rolling on its side and eyeballing us as if to say, "F*&% you, buddy, how stupid do you think I am?"

"But, but, how did you see us?"
 "The sun fractionally glinted off your watch, numb-nuts."
 "...Son of a bitch."

Then there's the sometimes-difficult wind, back-cast spoiling foliage and other complications associated with the sport. These are the factors that have made our life difficult so far this trip, and that have limited our success to lures only.

Paul is confident though, as we unpack the gear on the banks of the intimate Owen River, that he will be able to find us some fish. He's done it a few times before, he reckons.

Out and a trout

These northern South Island rivers demand casting accuracy rather than

X DRY LODGINGS



The gardens and grounds of Owen River Lodge are meticulously maintained.



A sight for sore eyes – the rooms are air-conditioned and extremely comfortable.

The product of perfect planning and foresight by Felix, Owen River Lodge is an incredible place. The care and thought that has gone into its design and lay-out, as well as the continuing care and thought that goes into the treatment of its guests and the fishing experience they will have, are to be commended. If you're looking to cast to some seriously big and smart brown trout, while being pampered with great food, massages, beautiful rooms and great company, check it out. It's an environmentally friendly lodge that takes great care to reduce its impact and caters to groups, couples, families and individual anglers.

Owen River Lodge operates from October 1 to April 30 annually, and rates will depend on the package you book and length of time you intend to stay.

www.owenriverlodge.co.nz
 Ph: 0011 64 3 523 9075

The best trout of the trip comes to the net. Scrine's relieved.



distance. Being able to throw out a full fly line is not as important as being able to cast distances of 5-15m with near-pinpoint accuracy.

Paul starts to spot fish almost as soon as we begin our walk up the banks of

"Fifteen seconds later, I strike. The trout has already had time to inhale my fly, gnaw on it a little bit, spit it out and tell the story to his mates over a beer"

the river, camera case in one hand, rod in the other. It's amazing how well-trained his eyes are. He points out fish that to my eyes are little more than smudges against the rocks on the bottom of the river.

Recent heavy rain has brought the water levels and flow right up, meaning dry-fly fishing is not really an option. Nymphs are the order of the day, and are tied on in accordance with Paul's patented New Zealand indicator – sheep's wool gathered from local barbed-wire fences.

Paul lifts rocks and inspects their underside to see which grubs and insects are crawling around. His impressive fly box holds replications of all the local trout candy.

The first piece of advice Paul offers me is that I'm making too many false casts. I know a few fly anglers out there are as guilty as me of this. It is very tempting at times to flick away, back and forth, forming glorious loops and searching for that perfect presentation. However, by the time you finally decide to release your line and let it roll out over the water, your rhythm (and the fish) may have disappeared. Quick casts require commitment and fast decision-making. If you are premeditating when you are going to release your line for the cast, you will not be making the best presentation. Instead, aim for the target and be prepared to roll the line

out when the forward cast feels like it's heading for the zone.

Learning curve

My white puff of woolen indicator drifts downstream, over the top of what is apparently a trout (though I'm still sceptical – reckon it's a rock).

"GO GO GO GO GO GO!" Paul screams at me.

Fifteen seconds later, I strike. The trout has already had time to inhale my fly, gnaw on it a little bit, casually spit it out and tell the story to his mates over a beer.

Paul scratches his head.

To his credit, Paul doesn't lose patience with us. He is full of helpful advice and constructive criticism, where I would have told myself to piss off back to Australia 17 times already. This is what sets good guides and bad guides apart. All guides are expected to be excellent fishermen – what makes them great is their ability to pass on their knowledge and expertise of the local area and techniques to their clients in a fun and helpful way. No-one likes to be berated and embarrassed by missed or lost fish – we do that enough to ourselves. Paul's infectious chuckle and insane knowledge of how to catch these trout are a good combination for us.

Felix explains to us later in the trip that it's possible for guests to stay at Owen River Lodge and fish the local waters without a guide, but that it's not recommended. Guiding isn't cheap, but if you're travelling to Owen River Lodge to catch trout, you'll be wasting your time by skimping on the guiding. Even expert fishermen go home with their tails between their legs in this

X COME FLY WITH ME



Scrine flew to Kiwi-land with Air New Zealand. Their 'The Works' package offers economy passengers the sorts of luxuries usually only afforded to business-class passengers in this age of budget airlines and cheap flights. Meals, drinks and an interactive entertainment system are all included! Sweet as, bro! Also, check out the Air New Zealand in-flight safety video (see screen-grab above!). It's bloody hilarious.

www.airnewzealand.com.au

Search Tags: Air New Zealand Safety Video

Thanks to Tourism New Zealand, too, for their assistance in organising *Modern Fishing's* travel.



All fish caught by Owen River Lodge guests are released.



The forgiving brown trout that broke the author's drought.

River of dreams

CONQUERING KIWILAND PART 2

X GEARED UP



Playing a quality trout in fast-running current is tense, and we lost a fair few fish!

Owen River Lodge can supply most of the gear you'll need, including quality waders, wading boots and an abundance of local flies. One of the symptoms of a fishing addiction though, is the compulsive acquisition of gear. Most anglers will come stocked with gear of their own. We took:

Snowbee XS-Pro wading boots: Quality cleated (not felt!) boots are of paramount importance in NZ. The XS-Pros kept us upright and stable in fast-flowing rivers.

Snowbee Prestige waders: Lightweight, comfortable and durable. You don't want cold NZ water down your pants, so quality waders are a must.

Innovator Velocity fly rods: We chose six-weight rods, with four-piece construction and a fast action. Perfect for when we were casting well – and not so well!

Waterworks/Lamson Litespeed reels: We used the LS2 and the K2 models and both performed faultlessly fitted with Scientific Anglers Sharkskin (WF6F).

Simms fly vest: We chose Simms' Freestone model. Lots of pockets made it the logical choice.

Mako sunglasses: A necessity when spotting trout. We used Mako's latest ET Signature Series glasses.

part of the world. That there are big fish here does not make them easy to see or catch!

Flying colours

It's been a frustrating couple of hours. We've both cast to fish and come

"My rod arcs and all of a sudden I've got a serious case of the fish shakes. I've been waiting for this moment for a long time"

within milliseconds of hooking up. These are some neurotic trout. Quick on the spit and ready to bolt for deeper water at the slightest indication of abnormality, it's not easy fishing, despite their abundance. Soon enough though, we manage to channel the trout whisperers within and understand the way these fish think. By the way a trout moves in the stream we are able to tell how relaxed, hungry or paranoid it is, and adjust our approach.

Paul spots a smaller fish, more likely to be forgiving of my lack of subtlety. I make a surprisingly good cast to it, and the sheepish indicator bobs below the surface. It only takes me about 10 seconds to strike this time, and the trout in question must have taken a liking to the taste of fur and feather. I'm on! My rod arcs dramatically and all of a sudden I've got a serious case of the fish shakes. I've been waiting for this moment for a long time. It's not a huge fish, and submits after a bit of leaping and thrashing around. It comes calmly to the net and I dance around like an Oxford St raver in my fashion-



Paul shows us how it's done.

able 'Brown Trout' (Leopard Print Buff for several moments. After a few photos and a couple of passionate snogs, the trout is released to grow bigger and wiser, as all fish caught by Owen River Lodge guests are encouraged to be.

PRO TIPS



LODGE LORE

- Sandflies are a menace anywhere near sand and freshwater in the South Island. Wear protective clothing and appropriate repellent, but keep it off your hands!
- A five- or six-weight rod is about right for fishing these rivers, and dull-coloured fly lines match the fishery well.
- Fishing licence fees are not included in any of the Owen River Lodge packages, and must be purchased independently. This can be done at the Lodge itself.
- Practise casting short distances with pinpoint accuracy – it's important to be able to present flies at short range with confidence in this region.
- Helicopter fishing is an option. If you are interested, make this clear to the staff at Owen River Lodge and they can make arrangements.
- Don't think you won't get burnt in New Zealand! We travelled there expecting mild temperatures and cloudy skies, but found ourselves covering up and suncreening constantly to avoid the sun's rays.



The author plays net man while a brown trout goes nuts in the shallows.



River of dreams

CONQUERING
KIWI LAND
PART 2



Janzen rated this the best steak he's ever eaten!

The editor's curse

The next day we fish the Inangahua River, about an hour's drive from the lodge, and it takes us a while to find the fish. The dirt road we drive down to reach our car park and starting point is called "Perseverance Road", and we consider the deep significance of this as we struggle to connect to anything while blind-fishing the fast-running waters of the Inangahua. It's after lunch

"Chef Ryan's three-course meals could grace the tables of some of the finest restaurants in Sydney, and the plates would come back licked clean"

when Janzen, who's cracked the casting code and is throwing some beautiful loops by now, hooks up to something big. Cruelly, the fish drops off. After the swearing has subsided, he puts another cast into the same channel and hooks up again. Same result.

I feel like the biggest arsehole in New Zealand when I steal his idea and cast into the same channel, and manage



Each course is as immaculately prepared as it is delicious.



Master and apprentice.

to hook-up and stay connected. I chase my fish downstream and after a dogged fight, manage to land my best fish of the trip. I am stoked, but it's not fair.

This is not to be the last heartbreak for Nick, who cruelly loses an even bigger fish at the net in the last hour of our last day.

Food, glorious food

After a hard day's fishing, there's nothing better than a beer and a good feed. At Owen River Lodge it's a chance to sample some of the fine local ales, chef Ryan's amazing cooking, and talk crap with any other anglers fishing at the lodge on any given day with different guides. Victorians and two-time Owen River Lodge guests, Tom and Joe, have us in stitches with their stories. I won't give too much away, but one involves a bloke they call "Jungle Jim" who tried to insulate his ceiling with a ute-load of rotting kelp. You can imagine where the conversations went from here.

Chef Ryan's three-course meals could grace the tables of some of the finest restaurants in Sydney, and the plates would come back licked clean. The food is simply incredible – the man's a genius.

Felix explains that he only orders export-quality meat, and only uses fresh and local ingredients as well as those grown at the Lodge itself!

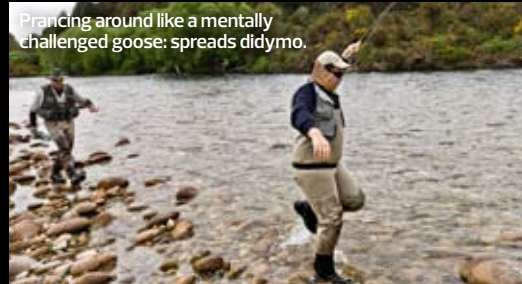
On the road again

When it comes time to leave, neither of us is ready to go. Scrubbing down our boots for customs inspection feels like torture – who knows when these cleats and soles will grace the grounds of Owen River Lodge again? Well, pretty bloody soon, hopefully.

X SAY NO TO DIDYMO



Prancing around like a mentally challenged goose: spreads didymo.



Didymosphenia geminata, or didymo, is an invasive diatom that is sadly wreaking havoc on many New Zealand freshwater rivers. "Rock snot", as it's known, spreads and grows quickly and forms choking brown mats on the bottom of lakes, rivers and streams.

Didymo can be spread in a single drop of water, so it is important you consider didymo prevention a priority when travelling to New Zealand.

Use cleated wading boots only – no felt allowed – and thoroughly clean all clothing that comes into contact with freshwater while fishing. Once cleaned with salt-water and/or didymo-killing solution, ensure your gear is dry before attempting to take it back to Australia.

Customs officers are justifiably strict and you can expect to have all of your gear and tackle thoroughly inspected and confiscated if it has not been cleaned and dried appropriately. You have been warned!